

POLS 3160 Politics and Media:

Information Warfare: Disinformation, Propaganda, Conspiracy Theories and the Assault on the Press

Professor Kathryn Joyce

Class times: Wednesday 6:05-8:35

Via Blackboard Collaborate

Office Hours: Wednesday 5-6 by appointment

Contact: kathrynajoyce@gmail.com

In “Politics and Media,” we’ll explore how the political and media landscape has become an information warzone, fought with weapons that include fake news—that is, actual disinformation created to sow conflict or chaos—as well as “Fake News”—a political accusation used to foster doubt about the free press and provide cover for government and business wrongdoing. We’ll look at related concepts including propaganda, public relations, conspiracy theories, and technological changes, and assess all of these in light of a struggling journalism industry, and the “epistemic crisis” facing our society, as people increasingly can’t determine or agree upon what is real. We’ll consider this as scholars, media consumers, activists, and potential journalists. Relying on journalistic case studies, as well as media and political theory, we’ll discuss how these contemporary phenomenon fit into our political moment, through class discussions, weekly reading response logs, group projects, and a long final paper.

Course Requirements

Participation. *This is a discussion-based class, even while we’re meeting remotely.* You must attend each class, via Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, and participate in a vigorously engaged manner that reflects both that you have done the reading, that you have thought about it and that you are listening to/reading your classmates. After one unexcused missed class, additional absence will result in deductions from your grade. **Participation is 30% of your grade.** This is the largest percentage of your grade, so please take it seriously. Be prepared to ask a question or comment on the readings in every class.

Reading log. Respond to at least one reading per week on the Blackboard discussion forum thread for that week. Your post should:

- be **two to three paragraphs long**;
- include direct references to or quotations from the text that you found significant, and a reflection on why that is;
- discuss how you think the reading relates to the larger topics of the class.
- Students are also required to **engage with at least two of their classmates’ posts** per week, in order to spur classroom discussion and debate. It goes without saying that all engagements should be civil and constructive.
- All posts are **due by the end of the day Sunday for each week of class.**

The cumulative grade for the reading logs is **20% of your grade**, though I will post partial grades for your responses three times during the semester.

Group project. Group presentation on an “information warfare” or “epistemic crisis” case study. **20% of grade.**

Final paper proposal: A one- to two-page narrative proposal for your final paper, due roughly a month before the final paper is due, explaining your selected topic, how it relates to the themes of the class, and at least two analytical sources you will use. Your final paper can be on the topic of your group project but it doesn't need to be. **(5% of your grade)**

Final paper (2500 words): Individual papers using a case study topic as a lens through which to analyze the state of the media and politics today. I will approve all topics in advance, but you have pretty wide range here to focus on examples of a conspiracy theory, disinformation or propaganda campaign, changes in technology or the media that affect the discourse, and more. Whatever topic you choose, your ultimate job is to use your case study to analyze and make an argument about the broader topic of “information warfare.” Papers must be grounded in examples, readings and at least five cited sources, including two analytical sources (which we will define more specifically in class). Your final paper is worth **25% of your grade.**

Ethics

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for policy implementation can be found at www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies. If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member *must* report the violation.

Accommodations

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at (718) 951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services, please provide your professor with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with them.

CUNY Student Bereavement Policy: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/about/initiatives/policies/bereavement.php>.

February 3: Welcome to “Politics and Media”

-Watch: “A Reporter’s Footage from Inside the Capitol Siege,” *The New Yorker*

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/video-dept/a-reporters-footage-from-inside-the-capitol-siege>

-“Flood the zone with shit’: How Misinformation Overwhelmed Our Democracy,” *Vox*

<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation>

-Watch: *Operation Infektion*, *The New York Times*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR_6dibpDfo

February 10: Fake News

Divide into groups for group project; coordinate next steps in group in class

-“Among the Insurrectionists,” *The New Yorker*

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/01/25/among-the-insurrectionists>

-“The American Abyss,” *The New York Times Magazine*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html>

-“The Macedonian Teens Who Mastered Fake News,” *Wired*

<https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>

-“The Agency,” *The New York Times Magazine*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>

-“Pizzagate: From Rumor, to Hashtag, to Gunfire in D.C.,” *The Washington Post*

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/pizzagate-from-rumor-to-hashtag-to-gunfire-in-dc/2016/12/06/4c7def50-bbd4-11e6-94ac-3d324840106c_story.html

February 17: Toxic Internet Culture

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Group presentation proposals due (verbally in class, or via email beforehand)

-“Reddit and the Struggle to Detoxify the Internet,” *The New Yorker*

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/19/reddit-and-the-struggle-to-detoxify-the-internet>

-“Everything Is Gamergate,” *The New York Times* (There are four short op-eds in this package. Please read them all.)

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/15/opinion/what-is-gamergate.html>

-“He Predicted the 2016 Fake News Crisis. Now He’s Worried About an Information Apocalypse,” *Buzzfeed*

https://www.buzzfeed.com/charliewarzel/the-terrifying-future-of-fake-news?utm_term=.lw082vgnQY#.ssYnvDm8kg

-“Inside Facebook’s Hellish Two Years—and Mark Zuckerberg’s Struggle to Fix it All,” *WIRED*

<https://www.wired.com/story/inside-facebook-mark-zuckerberg-2-years-of-hell/>

February 24: Principles of Journalism

-*Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy*, Alex S. Jones

Prologue: The Crisis

Chapter 1: The Iron Core

Chapter 4: Objectivity’s Last Stand

Chapter 5: Media Ethics: The Painful Balance (combined pdf on Blackboard)

-“An Ode to Fact Checking,” *Mother Jones*

<https://www.motherjones.com/media/2011/12/mac-mcclelland-burma-fact-checking-politifact/>

March 3: Media Bias and Objectivity

-Documentary: *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnrBQEAM3rE>

-“The Six Forms of Media Bias,” *The New York Times*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/opinion/media-bias-howard-schultz.html>

-“The View from Nowhere,” *Press Think*

<http://archive.pressthink.org/2003/09/18/jennings.html>

“A Reckoning Over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists,” *The New York Times*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/opinion/objectivity-black-journalists-coronavirus.html>

“*The New York Times* Tom Cotton op-ed/Why the media must defend American values,” *Vox*

<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/21281309/new-york-times-op-ed-editor-tom-cotton-is-trump-authoritarian>

-“What the Press Have and Should Have Learned from the Trump Era,” *On the Media*

<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/what-press-have-and-should-have-learned-trump-era>

March 10: Public Relations and Spin

-*PR!: A Social History of Spin*, Stuart Ewen (1996)

Chapter 3: Truth Happens: An Age of Publicity Begins

Chapter 4: Controlling Chaos (combined pdf on Blackboard)

-Documentary: *The Century of the Self* (2002)

Watch parts 1&3:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnPmgOR1M04>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ub2LB2MaGoM>

March 17: Language, Propaganda, Polarization

Groups 1 and 7 Present

-Report: *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, Rand Corporation – **Chapter 4 only**

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html

-“Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*

http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit/

-1984: Appendix: The Principles of Newspeak, George Orwell (1949)

http://orwell.ru/library/novels/1984/english/en_app

-“The Autocrat’s Language,” *New York Review of Books*

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/05/13/the-autocrats-language/>

-“Donald Trump and the Rise of Tribal Epistemology,” *Vox*

<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology>

March 24: Asymmetrical Propaganda

Group 2 Presents

-*Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (2018)

Chapter 1: Epistemic Crisis

Chapter 11: The Origins of Asymmetry (pdf on Blackboard)

-Documentary: *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004)

<https://vimeo.com/230478395/9bef69cca0>

-“The Making of the Fox News White House,” *The New Yorker*

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/11/the-making-of-the-fox-news-white-house>

March 31: No Class – Spring Break

April 7: Conspiracy Theories

Groups 3 and 5 Present

-“The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper's*

<https://blog.lix.cc/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Hofstadter-Paranoid-Style-American-Politics.pdf>

-*The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, Jesse Walker (2013)

Chapter 1: The Paranoid Style *Is* American Politics (pdf on Blackboard)

-*Conspiracy Theories*, Quassim Cassam (2019)

-Chapter 1: The (Real) Point of Conspiracy Theories

-Chapter 2: Why Are Conspiracy Theories So Popular? (pdf on Blackboard)

April 14:

Groups 4 and 6 Present

-*The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, Jesse Walker (2013)

Chapter 3: The Devil Next Door (pdf on Blackboard)

-“Why Rational People Buy Into Conspiracy Theories,” *The New York Times*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/magazine/why-rational-people-buy-into-conspiracy-theories.html>

-TV: “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street,” *The Twilight Zone*

<https://www.cbs.com/shows/touched-by-an-angel/video/mDLbaXrZaiqEdmDqqNMjKEJ7euJ45X2C/the-twilight-zone-the-monsters-are-due-on-maple-street/>

or via Amazon or Netflix, Season 1, Episode 22

April 21: Targets of Conspiracy Theories

ASSIGNMENT DUE: Proposal for final papers due

-*Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt*, Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker (1995)

Introduction

Chapter 1: The Best of Intentions

Chapter 2: Demonology (combined pdf on Blackboard)

-“Enemy in the Making: The Language of “Anti-Sorosism” in the U.S. and Hungary,”

The Public Eye

<https://www.politicalresearch.org/2020/07/09/enemy-making-language-anti-sorosism-us-and-hungary>

-“Skin in the Game,” Political Research Associates

<https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>

-“There’s Been a George Soros for Every Era of Anti-Semitic Panic,” *The Daily Beast*

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/theres-been-a-george-soros-for-every-era-of-antisemitic-panic>

April 28:

Guest speaker: Sarah Posner

“The Prophecies of Q,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>

“How QAnon Creates a Dangerous Alternate Reality,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/opinion/qanon-conspiracy-theory-arg.html>

-“How QAnon rode the pandemic to new heights—and fueled the viral anti-mask phenomenon,” *NBC News*

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/how-qanon-rode-pandemic-new-heights-fueled-viral-anti-mask-n1236695>

-“Did Media Literacy Backfire?” *Data&Society*

<https://points.datasociety.net/did-media-literacy-backfire-7418c084d88d>

-“The Trouble with ‘Q,’” *Moment Magazine*

<https://momentmag.com/opinion-the-trouble-with-qanon/>

-“Right-Wing Conspiracies Come to Life: An Interview with Sarah Posner,” *Moment Magazine*

<https://momentmag.com/right-wing-conspiracies-come-to-life-an-interview-with-sarah-posner/>

May 5:

-*The United States of Paranoia*

Chapter 7: The Water’s Gate (pdf on Blackboard)

-Podcast: *Slow Burn*, “Rabbit Holes,” Season 1, episode 6

http://www.slate.com/articles/slate_plus/watergate.html

<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/09/slow-burn-season-1-episode-6-transcript.html>

(or, via podcasting apps, *Slow Burn*, January 9 episode, “Rabbit Holes”)

-*A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum (2019)

Introduction

Chapter 1: Conspiracy without the Theory

Chapter 2: It’s True enough (combined pdf on Blackboard)

May 12:

-*Network Propaganda*

Chapter 12: Can the Internet Survive Democracy?

Chapter 13: What Can Men Do Against Such Reckless Hate (combined pdf on Blackboard)

May 19:

ASSIGNMENT: Final papers due via Blackboard